

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON
AT SEATTLE

ANDREW RUTHERFORD.

CASE NO. C09-1693 MJP

Plaintiff,

ORDER DENYING DEFENDANTS'
RENEWED MOTION FOR
JUDGMENT AS A MATTER OF
LAW

JASON McKISSACK, et al.,

Defendants.

This matter comes before the Court on Defendants' renewed motion for judgment as a matter of law. (Dkt. No. 183.) Having reviewed the motion, the response (Dkt. No. 189), the reply (Dkt. No. 191), and all related papers, the Court DENIES the motion.

Background

Given the parties' familiarity with the case, the Court provides little background.

21 Because Defendants' arguments focus on the potential inconsistency between the unlawful
22 detention and false imprisonment claims, the Court lays out the jury instructions in some detail.

In “Count Four,” the jury was instructed on Rutherford’s claim of false imprisonment.

24 The jury was told to consider whether Defendant Chin falsely imprisoned Rutherford during “the

1 events that transpired after Defendant Chin ordered Plaintiff to the ground in their initial
2 confrontation.” (Dkt. No. 157 at 23.) Rutherford had to prove to the jury three elements: “(1)
3 Plaintiff was restrained or imprisoned; (2) Defendant Chin’s actions were a proximate cause of
4 the restraint or imprisonment; and (3) Defendant Chin . . . exceeded the reasonable length and
5 scope of the investigatory stop.” (Id.) As to the first element the jury was instructed as follows:

6 A person is restrained or imprisoned when he is deprived of either liberty of
7 movement or freedom to remain in the place of his lawful choice; and such
8 restraint or imprisonment may be accomplished by physical force alone, or by
threat of force, or by conduct reasonably implying that force will be used.

9 (Id.)

10 The false imprisonment claim was similar to, but distinct from the unlawful detention
11 claim in “Count One.” In the unlawful detention claim, the jury was instructed to consider a
12 similar time frame as to the commencement of the acts: “you are to focus only on the time from
13 when Plaintiff exited Mr. Alfonzo’s vehicle up to the point Plaintiff got up from being seated on
14 the roadway.” (Dkt. No. 157 at 16.) The unlawful detention claim required Rutherford to prove
15 that Defendant Chin exceeded the reasonable length and scope of the investigatory stop.
16 Rutherford had to prove three elements: (1) Defendant Chin seized Plaintiff’s person; (2) in
17 seizing Plaintiff’s person, Defendant Chin acted intentionally; and (3) the seizure was
18 unreasonable. (Id.) The parties stipulated to the fact that Rutherford was seized. (Id. at 17.)
19 The Court also defined what it meant to be seized using the Ninth Circuit pattern instruction:

20 A defendant “seizes” the plaintiff’s person when he restrains the plaintiff’s liberty
21 by physical force or a show of authority. A person’s liberty is restrained when,
under all of the circumstances, a reasonable person would not have felt free to
ignore the presence of law enforcement officers and to go about his business.

22 (Id.) Of particular note, this definition varies from the instructions defining “restrain or
23 imprison” in the false imprisonment claim.

The jury returned a general verdict in favor of Rutherford only on the unlawful detention claim, not the false imprisonment or any other claim.

Analysis

A. Standard of Review

“Judgment as a matter of law is proper if the evidence, viewed in the light most favorable to the nonmoving party, permits only one reasonable conclusion.” Graves v. City of Coeur D’Alene, 339 F.3d 828, 838 (9th Cir. 2003) abrogated on other grounds by Hiibel v. Sixth Judicial Dist. Ct. of Nv., 542 U.S. 177 (2004). “A jury’s verdict must be upheld if it is supported by substantial evidence, which is evidence adequate to support the jury’s conclusion, even if it is also possible to draw a contrary conclusion.” Pavao v. Pagay, 307 F.3d 915, 918 (9th Cir. 2002). The Court is instructed “not [to] weigh the evidence, but should simply ask whether the plaintiff has presented sufficient evidence to support the jury’s conclusion.” Harper v. City of Los Angeles, 533 F.3d 1010, 1021 (9th Cir. 2008). “If sufficient evidence is presented to a jury on a particular issue and if the jury instructions on the issue stated the law correctly, the court must sustain the jury’s verdict.” Id.

B. No Inconsistent Verdict

Defendants essentially argue that the jury returned an inconsistent verdict that requires judgment as a matter of law to be entered in their favor. This is erroneous. Defendants have failed to show an actual inconsistency in the verdict.

Although the Ninth Circuit has recognized three potential ways a general verdict can be inconsistent, only one is relevant here: when the jury returns “two general verdicts that, under any facts, seem to be legally irreconcilable.” Zhang v. Am. Gem Seafoods, Inc., 339 F.3d 1020, 1032 (9th Cir. 2003). In Zhang the court found no inconsistency in a general verdict where the

1 jury found for plaintiff on his § 1981 racial discrimination claim, but against him on his claim
2 brought under Washington's Law Against Discrimination. Id. at 1034-35. The Court concluded
3 that, “[u]nless one legal conclusion is the prerequisite for another, inconsistencies between them
4 must stand.” Id. at 1034.

5 Like the outcome in Zhang, Defendants have not shown the verdicts to be legally
6 irreconcilable. The two claims involve different legal standards, and neither is a prerequisite to
7 the other. In the false imprisonment claim, Rutherford had to prove he was “restrained or
8 imprisoned,” a fact to which the parties did not stipulate. In the unlawful detention claim,
9 however, Rutherford had to prove he was “seized,” a term that was not only defined differently
10 from “restrained or imprisoned,” but also stipulated to as being proved by the parties. The
11 claims thus involved different legal questions, and although there was some overlap, the two
12 claims are not coextensive or predicates to each other. The jury’s general verdicts produced no
13 inconsistencies.

14 Defendants seize on the fact that both claims required the jury to determine whether
15 Defendant Chin “exceeded the reasonable length and scope of the detention.” But Defendants
16 fail to explain how this one element makes the two claims legally coextensive or predicates to
17 each other. They ignore that the two claims involve different legal standards and have different
18 elements, which permitted the jury to reach different conclusions. This is a fatal defect in
19 Defendants’ motion. The Court DENIES Defendants’ motion for judgment as a matter of law
20 on this issue.

21 C. Sufficiency of Evidence Supports the Verdict

22 Defendants attempt to reargue the merits of the case without acknowledging or applying
23 the deferential standard owed to Rutherford’s presentation of the facts and the jury’s verdict. See
24

1 Pavao, 307 F.3d at 918. Defendants start from the faulty premise that the jury must have ignored
2 the Court's instructions and considered the events occurring prior to Rutherford exiting the Jeep
3 in order to find for Rutherford on the unlawful detention claim. See Westinghouse Elec. Corp. v.
4 Gen. Circuit Breaker & Elec. Supply Inc., 106 F.3d 894, 902 (9th Cir. 1997) ("[T]he court [is] to
5 presume that juries follow the law."). Defendants' argument is deeply flawed.

6 In "Count One, the jury ultimately only had to determine whether Defendant Chin
7 exceeded a reasonable length and scope of the Terry stop. The Court first instructed the jury that
8 Defendant Chin had authority to investigate "the municipal law violations of reckless driving and
9 driving under the influence." (Dkt. No. 157 at 16.) The jury was then told that it had to consider
10 the totality of the circumstances to determine whether the investigatory stop exceeded a
11 reasonable length and scope from the time Rutherford exited the Jeep to when Rutherford got up
12 from being seated in the roadway. (Id. at 16-17.) To make this determination the jury was
13 instructed to consider: (1) the aggressiveness of the police methods; (2) how much of Plaintiff's
14 liberty was restricted; and (3) whether the officer had a sufficient basis to fear for his safety to
15 warrant the intrusiveness of the action taken. (Id.)

16 At trial, Rutherford put on substantial evidence that his detention exceeded a reasonable
17 length and scope. The jury heard testimony that Defendant Chin used a highly aggressive
18 manner in confronting all three individuals. The jury also heard testimony from Rutherford and
19 Alfonzo that Defendant Chin pointed his gun at Rutherford and forced him to sit at gun point.
20 (Rutherford Testimony at 35-39; Alfonzo Testimony at 22-26.) This severely restricted
21 Rutherford's liberty and used an extremely high level of force for a situation where none of the
22 suspects were armed, and were there was no ongoing criminal activity. The jury also heard
23 testimony that Alfonzo identified himself as the driver, which permitted Defendant Chin to
24

1 exclude Rutherford as a suspect of the two municipal violations he observed the driver of the
2 Jeep make. While Defendant Chin may have had reason to doubt that Alfonzo was the driver, it
3 was up to the jury to determine, based on the totality of the circumstances, whether it was
4 reasonable to continue to detain Rutherford. (Dkt. No. 157 at 17.) This evidence was sufficient
5 to permit the jury to return a verdict in favor of Rutherford on this claim, and the Court must
6 sustain the verdict. Harper, 533 F.3d at 1021.

7 The Court DENIES Defendants' motion on this issue.

8 D. Qualified Immunity

9 Defendants argue that Defendant Chin is entitled to qualified immunity because he was
10 permitted to use his gun during the Terry stop without acting illegally. This is yet another
11 untenable and flawed argument.

12 First, the argument improperly characterizes the jury's verdict. Because the jury returned
13 a general verdict, the Court cannot know exactly why the jury found Defendant Chin exceeded
14 the reasonable length and scope of the Terry stop. The jury was instructed to consider the
15 totality of the circumstances and, as explained above, there were several factors it could have
16 relied on to return a verdict in Rutherford's favor. Defendants simply view the evidence in their
17 favor and conclude that Defendant Chin's use of his weapon was the sole basis on which the jury
18 could return a verdict on the first claim. (Dkt. No. 183 at 16-17.) Applying the proper,
19 deferential standard, the Court cannot make the same assumption. Thus, Defendants' qualified
20 immunity argument is fatally flawed in its premise and is DENIED.

21 Second, even if the Court accepts for the sake of argument that the jury's verdict turned
22 solely on the use of the weapon, the Court finds that Defendant Chin violated clearly established
23 law and is not entitled to qualified immunity.

1 In performing a qualified immunity analysis, the Court engages in a two-step process in
2 no mandatory order. Pearson v. Callahan, 129 S. Ct. 808, 818 (2009). The Court asks whether
3 the plaintiff has alleged a violation of a constitutional right and whether the constitutional right is
4 clearly established. Saucier v. Katz, 533 U.S. 194, 201 (2001). Here, the only question is
5 whether the constitutional right is clearly established, given the jury found Defendant Chin
6 violated Plaintiff's constitutional rights under the Fourth Amendment.

7 “[T]he law [is] clearly established that, when making a Terry stop, officers may not use
8 highly intrusive measures such as the ones used here [pointing a gun and ordering individuals out
9 of a car], unless the circumstances reasonably justify such extraordinary procedures in order to
10 ensure the officers' safety.” Washington v. Lambert, 98 F.3d 1181, 1192 (9th Cir. 1996).
11 “Under ordinary circumstances, when the police have only reasonable suspicion to make an
12 investigatory stop, drawing weapons and using handcuffs and other restraints will violate the
13 Fourth Amendment.” Id. at 1187. The law is also “clearly established that if the Terry-stop
14 suspects are cooperative and the officers do not have specific information that they are armed or
15 specific information linking them to a recent or inchoate dangerous crime, the use of such
16 aggressive and highly intrusive tactics is not warranted . . . [unless] there are no other
17 extraordinary circumstances involved.” Id. The extraordinary circumstances are four-fold:

18 our cases make clear that we have only allowed the use of especially intrusive means of
19 effecting a stop in special circumstances, such as 1) where the suspect is uncooperative or
20 takes action at the scene that raises a reasonable possibility of danger or flight; 2) where
21 the police have information that the suspect is currently armed; 3) where the stop closely
22 follows a violent crime; and 4) where the police have information that a crime that may
23 involve violence is about to occur.

24 Id. at 1189.

25 Construing the facts in the light most favorable to Rutherford, Defendant Chin violated
26 clearly established law by using a weapon during the Terry stop and detaining Rutherford after
27

1 he learned he was not the driver of the parked vehicle. The circumstances of the case show that
2 none of the exceptional circumstances set out in Washington that allow the use of a gun is met.
3 First, construing the testimony in Rutherford's favor, it does not appear Rutherford was
4 uncooperative—he sat in the road when asked and he remained there only until the speeding
5 police vehicle appeared on the horizon caused him to fear for his safety. Williams, 98 F.3d at
6 1189. That he may have been reticent to act does not show lack of compliance. Second, there
7 was no indication he was armed. Id. Third, no violent crime had been observed. Id. Fourth,
8 there was no information a new crime of violence was about to occur. Id. Instead, the use of the
9 gun was largely occasioned by Defendant Chin's poor judgment that led him to exit his
10 unmarked, personal vehicle in plain clothes on a dark dead-end street to confront three
11 individuals who were no longer driving. Moreover, Defendant Chin admitted he lacked probable
12 cause to arrest Rutherford for the reckless driving and DUI offenses he believed he observed.
13 There is no basis on which to grant Defendant Chin qualified immunity, given that Defendant
14 Chin violated clearly established law.

15 Defendants try to turn the state of the law on its head by suggesting “only in extreme
16 circumstances have courts found a mere display of potential force to be sufficient to transform a
17 Terry stop into an arrest.” (Dkt. No. 183 at 19.) Astoundingly, Defendants cite Washington to
18 make this point, while ignoring the very holding of the case. Pointing and brandishing a gun
19 during a Terry stop is only permissible in extreme cases. Washington, 98 F.3d at 1192.
20 Defendants’ argument is poorly thought through and certainly not well taken.

21 Defendants also seize on language in Washington to suggest an officer can always use a
22 gun when outnumbered. This is not a valid argument. The court in Washington noted the
23 Seventh Circuit has concluded that the use of a weapon can be proper in an investigative stop
24

1 where the officer is outnumbered. Id. at 1190 (citing United States v. Serna-Barreto, 842 F.2d
2 965 (7th Cir. 1988)). A close examination of Serna-Barreto does not support the broad rule
3 Defendants urge. As the court in Serna-Barreto first noted, “[i]t would be a sad day for the
4 people of the United States if police had carte blanche to point a gun at each and every person of
5 whom they had an ‘articulable suspicion’ of engaging in criminal activity.” Id. at 967. Only the
6 particular and unique facts of that case justified the use of the gun in effectuating the stop—facts
7 that are entirely distinct from those before the Court now. In Serna-Barreto, a single officer at
8 night confronted a car carrying four individuals that he had observed engage in a drug sale. Id.
9 The officer suspected the passengers were likely armed and willing to shoot an officer, and
10 indeed the defendant testified she was not scared by the gun. Id. at 967-68. In the case before
11 the Court here, however, no one was suspected of being armed, all three individuals were out in
12 the open and they complied with the officer’s demands to be seated and answer questions.
13 Defendants make much of the fact Thant advanced on Defendant Chin, but the testimony at trial,
14 construed in Rutherford’s favor, showed he only moved directly toward Defendant Chin when
15 ordered to do so. Thus, the mere fact Defendant Chin was outnumbered does not entitle him to
16 qualified immunity.

17 **Conclusion**

18 Defendants have not shown any defect in the jury’s verdict. Defendants ignore the legal
19 standards requiring deference to the jury’s verdict, and simply recast the testimony in their own
20 favor in contravention to the proper legal standard. This is no basis to obtain relief. Defendants
21 fail to show the jury’s verdict was inconsistent or unsupported by the evidence. Defendants have
22 also shown no right to qualified immunity given that Defendant Chin violated clearly established
23 law. The Court DENIES the motion.

1 The clerk is ordered to provide copies of this order to all counsel.

2 Dated this 4th day of August, 2011.

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24



Marsha J. Pechman
United States District Judge